

The Boy On The Bus

I told my mother that I didn't want to go to my grandfather's farm again. She told me that life is not about what we want. She was too sick to have a nine-year-old home all summer and at least I would get to see my brother who was living there year round. She said she missed him more than I can know.

There was a change of clothing and a peanut butter sandwich in the brown grocery bag she handed me as she told me to be strong. She said she will miss me too when I am gone.

I turned away and climbed the steps of the Greyhound Bus. As I walked down the aisle I saw three unoccupied seats in the third to the last row. I took the one next to the window and sat down with the paper bag on my lap. My mother stood on the concrete apron in front of the Greyhound Depot holding a handkerchief to her face as she watched me go. The goodbyes were over.

I carried a new comic book, *Superman and the Hidden Gold*, to read, but as soon as the bus pulled onto Highway 101, I stared out the window instead and watched the eucalyptus trees silhouetted against the fog bank that hovered offshore like a gray wall in the middle distance, and then the avocado orchards fronted with oleanders, and the live oaks on the hillsides by Mariposa Reina, and the Gaviota sandstone where the highway swerved

northeast through a narrow notch in the Coast Range. I scanned the hills hoping I would see a deer. It was mine yet none of it was mine. I sat clutching my belongings and staring out the window. The bus wasn't thirty minutes up the 101 and I ached to go back home, but couldn't.

Three men sat in the back bench seat, the only one that stretched from one side of the bus to the other, smoking cigarettes and passing a brown paper bag back and forth among themselves, drinking from it, and talking quietly in Spanish. They wore dirty blue jeans, work boots, and sweat-stained straw hats. Their shirts weren't any better than the old tee shirt I wore.

The first stop was in Buellton where a young woman led a child toward the back of the bus and took the two aisle seats next to me. She flashed a look of disdain at the men smoking and drinking, and when the child stared, she turned him around and pushed him into his seat next to me.

"They are not people we know or want to know," she whispered. She reached into a bag and brought out a coloring book and a handful of crayons and dropped them in the child's lap. He picked up the book and thumbed through the pages. The woman leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes.

I turned again to the window to watch for deer on the hillsides as the bus swept along the highway winding in a shallow valley sided by grass covered hills and the dark bunched forms of scattered live oaks.

After a while, the child turned to me.

“Where are you going,” he asked. He put his coloring book down on his lap.

“I’m going to Paso Robles,” I said. “Do you know where that is.”

“Uh, uh.” The crayons dropped to the floor. The woman didn’t notice, didn’t open her eyes. She slept.

“Where you going?” I asked.

“Ma says we’re going to King City. We’re going to see Jim there. He sent Ma a ring. She says we’ll live with him.”

“Is Jim your father?”

“I don’t know where my Pa is. He went away. Ma says he was mad at me. Jim doesn’t like me either. He said I couldn’t go there with Ma, but she said she wouldn’t go without me.”

“My father is in the hospital,” I said. “I have to go to Paso Robles every summer to live with my grandparents. I would rather stay at home with my Mom. That’s where my friends are.”

“I don’t have any friends,” he said.

We crossed over the Santa Maria River, a dry riverbed with seep willows and creosote bushes growing along the banks. The boy got off the seat and picked up the crayons.

“You ever been to King City?” I asked.

“I don’t even know where it is.”

“It’s north of Paso,” I said.

“In two more days I’m going to be five,” he said. He took one of the crayons and started coloring in his book.

I stared at the eucalyptus groves as we passed Nipomo. In Santa Barbara there are giant eucalyptus trees that shed long brown strips of bark; In Nipomo the trees are laid out in rows, like a plantation, and the ground underneath is spread with bark and broken limbs and almost nothing else grows there. Rusty barbed wire stapled on whitened posts sags in the space between the trees and the road. When I go by there, it all looks old, desolate, and deserted.

At Pismo Beach the highway came close to the ocean again and the fog bank hovered offshore. I saw the waves building and coming toward a beach I couldn’t see, and I thought of home and walking in the wet sand with waves washing up around my ankles.

In San Luis Obispo the bus stopped at the Greyhound Station, and as a man and a woman got off, a gray-haired woman in a red dress got on. She carried a black and white cat in a wire cage and took a seat behind the driver.

“Ma, can we have a cat when we get to King City?” the boy asked.

“We’ll see,” said his mother.

I have a cat named Catalpa. My mother said she’ll take care of it.

The bus labored up the Cuesta Grade and over the top, where chaparral covered the hillsides, then started downhill and the fields opened up into drying grasslands where scattered black oaks spread their limbs, some heavy with leaves and others gray and dead with shattered limbs on the ground. The fields were speckled with small heaps of dirt, ground squirrel burrows, and the squirrels were scattered, some standing guard while others foraged in the grass. No deer.

The bus gained speed on the downhill slope and raced giant trucks and passed them till we got to Atascadero where the Greyhound turned off and wheezed to a stop at a small station by the park. The three men in the back scrambled down the aisle and out onto the street. They walked away arm in arm singing.

The woman, now awake, picked up the child and moved to the rear seat where the boy lay down and slept. I turned the pages of my comic book, but I was tired of sitting and the pictures and letters didn’t interest me.

As we entered Paso Robles, the bus slowed and rolled down Spring Street toward the Greyhound Depot.

“I’m hungry,” I heard the boy say.

I turned around and looked as he sat up rubbing his eyes.

“We don’t have anything,” the woman said. “I’ll get you something to eat when we get to King City.”

I took the peanut butter sandwich out of my bag and carried it to the back seat. “You can have this,” I said. “I’m not hungry.” The boy reached for the wax paper wrapped sandwich while looking up at the woman as though waiting for approval.

“Thank you,” she said. “I didn’t have a chance to pack any food for us. We’ll share it.” She took the sandwich from the boy, unwrapped it, and tore it in half. She gave half to the boy who started eating.

“Say thank you,” she said.

“Thank you,” said the boy. Bits of food fell from his mouth.

The bus stopped at the depot, brakes hissing, engine idling, and the gray-uniformed bus driver stood up from his seat behind the huge steering wheel and stretched. I looked out the window.

My grandfather, grandmother, and kid brother, all dressed in going-to-town clothes, stood on the sidewalk outside the bus depot. My grandmother waved when she saw me through the glass. I grabbed my bag and walked to

the front of the bus, turned and waved to the boy sitting on the back seat, and then jumped down the two steps to the pavement.

My grandfather said hello, then stood quietly while my grandmother hugged me and patted me on the arm just as though I was hers. My kid brother pulled a handful of marbles, puries, from his pocket and handed them to me.

“I brought these for you,” he said. “I have some steelies too”

“These’re keen” I said. Thanks.” I rolled them around in my hands. The last time I saw him he had a shoebox full of marbles.

“You still have a box of marbles?” I asked.

“They’re under my bed,” he said.

We were still standing on the sidewalk when the bus rolled out of the station. As it passed, I saw the boy with his face pressed to the back window. He waved.